

Message Text

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FOR NEA AND NEA/ARN ONLY

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, SY
SUBJ: SYRIAN JEWRY: AMBASSADOR RAISES MARRIAGE PETITION LIST
WITH PRESIDENT ASSAD AND PRESIDENTIAL ADVISOR DAOUDY

REF: DAMASCUS 1620

1. I PRESENTED NEW LIST OF AMERICAN CITIZEN SUITORS FOR 52 SYRIAN JEWISH WOMEN IN APRIL 16 MEETING WITH PRESIDENTIAL POLITICAL ADVISOR DAOUDY. DAOUDY, WHO HAS ALWAYS SHOWN IRRITATION AT BEING ASKED TO DEAL WITH THIS ISSUE, RAISED HIS EYEBROWS AT THE NUMBER ON THE LIST. I REMINDED HIM OF PRESIDENT ASSAD'S NOVEMBER 29 UNDERTAKING TO ME THAT HE WOULD STAND BEHIND HIS PROMIS TO PRESIDENT CARTER TO HANDLE INDIVIDUAL CASES ON A HUMANITARIAN BASIS. DAOUDY GRUMBLED THAT "IF PRESIDENT ASSAD EVER DECIDES TO AGREE TO ANY FURTHER DEPARTURES THE VOMVEMENT OF THOSE ON THIS LIST WILL HAVE TO BE SPREAD OUT OVER TIME." I SAID I RECOGNIZED THAT THE TIMING AND SPECIFIC NUMBERS WHO WILL DEPART SYRIA WERE QUESTIONS OF SYRIAN SOVEREIGN DECISION-MAKING, BUT I WANTED AGAIN TO UNDERSCORE THE IMPORTANCE THIS ISSUE PLAYED IN OUR BILATERAL RELATIONS. NOT ONLY WAS IT RIGHT AND HUMANITARIAN THAT THESE WOMEN BE GIVEN A CHANCE FOR
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MARRIAGE TO A MEMBER OF THEIR OWN FAITH--WHICH THEY WOULD NOT HAVE IF THEY REMAINED IN SYRIA-- BUT HE SHOULD NOT FORGET THERE WERE MANY CRITICS OF SYRIAN-AMERICAN BILATERAL RELATIONS WHO SEEK TO USE THIS ISSUE TO EMBARRASS PRESIDENT CARTER IN HIS EFFORTS TO MAINTAIN AND DEEPEN OUR BILATERAL TIES. DAOUDY REPLIED TERSELY THAT THE MATTER WOULD BE REFERRED TO THE COMPETENT

AUTHORITIES. (BY THIS I UNDERSTOOD HIM TO MEAN THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR.)

2. THE FOLLOWING DAY, APRIL 17, IN MY FARWELL CALL ON PRESIDENT ASSAD, I DELIVERED PRESIDENT CARTER'S APRIL 14 LETTER AND NOTED THAT I HAD THE PREVIOUS DAY HANDED DAOUDY A LIST OF 52 NAMES OF AMERICAN SUITORS FOR SYRIAN JEWISH BRIDES.

3. SAID I WANTED TO STRESS PERSONALLY TO THE PRESIDENT THAT HOWEVER SURPRISING HE MIGHT CONSIDER IT, THIS ISSUE IS SIGNIFICANT ELEMENT IN THE DEVELOPING OF CLOSER BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN OUR TWO COUNTRIES. NOTED CARTER HAD JUST WRITTEN OF HIS CONTINUED PERSONAL INTEREST. WE DEEPLY HOPED THAT THE DOOR WILL STAY OPEN AND THAT THE PROCESS CONTINUE OF PERMITTING THESE WOMEN TO TRAVEL TO THE US FOR MARRIAGE. ASSAD ASKED, "IS THIS REALLY A QUESTION OF MARRIAGE OR OF EMIGRATION?" I REPLIED IT WAS THE LATTER. NOTED THAT THREE OF THE YOUNG WOMEN OF THE ORIGINAL GROUP WERE ALREADY MARRIED, WHILE OTHERS REMAINED IN SCHOOL LEARNING ENGLISH AND DEVELOPING VOCATIONAL SKILLS. ASSAD RECALLED THAT HE HAD ASSURED CARTER THAT HE WOULD DEAL WITH INDIVIDUAL CASES OF A HUMANITARIAN CHARACTER. BUT HE WAS CONCERNED THE WHOLE EFFORT "IS BEING EXPOLITED BY ZIONISTS AND GIVEN A POLITICAL CHARACTER." I SAID I COULD UNDERSTAND HIS FELLING THIS WAY IN LIGHT OF STATEMENTS BY CONFIDENTIAL

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THE ISRAELI LEADERSHIP ABOUT THE SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY. BUT WE CONSIDERED THE MARRIAGE ISSUE COULD AND SHOULD BE ISOLATED FROM POLITICS. THE HUMAN RIGHT TO TRAVEL AND TO MARRY SHOULD NOT BE COME A POLITICAL ISSUE AND IT WOULD BE FAR BETTER FOR OUR BILATERAL RELATIONS THAT WE BOTH TREAT THE QUESTION OF MARRIAGE AS A HUMANITARIAN ONE.

4. THE PRESIDENT OBSERVED THAT THE NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS WE WERE SUBMITTING SUGGESTED TO HIM THE REAL ISSUE WAS EMIGRATION AND NOT MARRIAGE. SYRIA OPPOSED EMIGRATION OF ITS JEWISH CITIZENS BECAUSE THOSE FROM THE SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY WHO HAD EMIGRATED GENERALLY ENDED UP IN ISRAEL. I REPLIED THAT I HAD GOTTEN TO KNOW WELL THE SPONSOR OF THIS MARRIAGE PROGRAM IN BROOKLYN (STEVE SHALOM) AND WAS CONVINCED THAT HIS MOTIVATIONS WERE TOTALLY HUMANITARIAN AND DEVOID OF POLITICAL OVERTONES. CONCERNED BY THE INBALANCE OF SEXES IN SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY, HE HAD SPENT A GOOD DEAL OF TIME ON THIS PROGRAM TRYING TO FIND A WAY TO GIVE THE YONG WOMEN A CHANCE OF MARRAGE, ASSAD ASKED WHY THEY WERE ATTENDING SCHOOL IN THE STATES WHEN THEY WERE FREE TO CONTINUE

THEIR EDUCATION IN SYRIA. REPLIED THIS WAS TRUE, BUT THE SYRIAN COMMUNITY WAS HIGHLY CONSERVATIVE AND IT WAS COMMON PRACTICE FOR THE JEWISH GIRLS TO LEAVE SCHOOL TO GO TO WORK OR STAY HOME AFTER THE PRIMARY GRADES. ASSAD SAID THAT THIS QUESTION WILL BE DEALT WITH FROM A HUMANITARIAN POINT OF VIEW. SYRIA'S ATTITUDE WOULD BE POSITIVE AS LONG AS IT DOES NOT DECIDE THAT QUESTION IS PRIMARILY ONE OF EMIGRATION. HE SAID HE WOULD DISCUSS THE MATTER FURTHER WITH HIS OFFICIALS.

5. COMMENT: UNLESS OBJECTION PRECEIVED, I THINK IT DESIRABLE THAT DCM PELLETREAU NOW CONTACT COMMUNITY LEADER TOUTAH AND INFORM HIM, WITHOUT IDENTIFYING EITHER DAOUDY OR ASSAD, THAT WE HAVE FURNISHED PRESIDENCY THE LIST OF 52. CONFIDENTIAL

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HE WOULD SUGGEST THAT TOUTAH APPROACH SYRIAN SECURITY OFFICER CONCERNED, ABD AL-SAMAD OR MESSAOUD, SAYING THAT HE, TOUTAH, HAD RECEIVED A FURTHER SET OF MARRIAGE PROPOSALS AND ASK HOW HE SHOULD PROCEED. TO KEEP THIS MOVING, PELLETREAU AS CHARGE WILL PROBABLY HAVE TO MAKE A FURTHER APPROACH AT THE DAOUDY LEVEL AND DEPARTMENT MAY ALSO WISH CONSIDER RAISING IT AGAIN WITH KABBANI IN WASHINGTON. MURPHY

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